Jewel of India, Gift to Earth

A Centenary Tribute to the Natural Farming Pioneer, Bhaskar Save

From bewilderment in the face of multiple spiralling crises – ecological, economic, political, socio-cultural, psycho-spiritual, medical – rises a deep yearning for a healing path … a compassionate empowerment in harmony with Nature and fellow humans.

Without doubt, the global environmental and climatic upheavals now *demand* that the era of relentless over-exploitation of non-renewable fossil resources, must soon yield to an age of regenerating our living biological wealth, and a culture of nurture, even as we re-examine how to meet our core needs, and grow the food we eat.

Bhaskar Save states, "I say with conviction that only by poly-cultural organic farming in harmony with Nature, can India sustainably provide abundant wholesome food and meet every basic need of all – to live in health, dignity and peace."

Born a century ago, on 27th January, 1922, Bhaskar Save inspired and mentored 3 generations of organic farmers. The acclaimed 'Gandhi of Natural Farming' – and 'guru of many current day gurus' – left his mortal body on 24th October, 2015. But his message of earth care and people care shines brightly as a guiding beacon for humanity … to help us tide over our current civilizational mess!

Bhaskar Save at his farm, Kalpavruksha

"Business as usual is not an option," bluntly concludes *The World Agriculture Report,* aka 'IAASTD Report'. The detailed Report was prepared over 4 years after an in-depth study by 400

agricultural experts and nearly 1,000 multi-disciplinary reviewers from all over the world, with representatives from 56 countries, including India; and also FAO, World Bank, WHO, UNDP, UNEP. It unambiguously recommends that small-scale farmers practicing agro-ecological, organic methods are the way forward, with indigenous knowledge playing an important role.

"Co-operation is the fundamental Law of Nature," declares a sign at the entrance to Bhaskar Save's orchard-farm. This simple and concise introduction to the philosophy and practice of natural farming, is rooted in Bhaskarbhai's deep understanding of the symbiotic relationships in nature. Masanobu Fukuoka, the legendary Japanese natural farmer, visited his farm in 1997, and described it as "the best in the world, even better than my own farm!"

'Co-operation is the fundamental Law of Nature;' the sign at the entrance to Bhaskar Save's farm

Save's farm, Kalpavruksha – in southernmost coastal Gujarat – is a veritable food forest and a net harvester of water, energy and fertility to the local eco-system, rather than a net consumer. The farm yield – in all aspects of total quantity, nutritional quality, taste, biological diversity, ecological sustainability, and economic profitability – is superior to any farm using chemicals, while costs (mainly labour for harvesting) are minimal, and external inputs almost zero.

Bhaskar Save with his grandchildren at Kalpavruksha

In 2010, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) – the global umbrella body of organic farmers and movements – honoured Save with the 'One World Award for Lifetime Achievement'.

Bhaskar Save receives the 'One World Award for Lifetime Achievement' from the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) in Germany, 2010

'Natural farming' is holistic and bio-diverse organic farming in harmony with nature. In its purest evolved form, it is a 'do-nothing' path, where nature does everything, or almost everything, and little needs to be done by the farmer. This can best be achieved progressively with tree crops and perennials, especially in tropical climes. As Bhaskar Save explains, "When a

tree sapling planted by a farmer is still young and tender, it needs some attention, just like a child. But as it matures, it can look after itself, and then it looks after the farmer." With annual or seasonal field crops, continuing attention and work by the farmer are needed, but even here, the labour and other inputs progressively diminish while yields improve as the soil regains its health, and symbiotic biodiversity is re-integrated.

Food Forest Future

How did our human ancestors in this ancient 'cradle of civilization' meet their food needs before the dawn of agriculture, 10,000 years back? Or in the 9,950 years that followed until the so-called 'Green Revolution', barely 5-6 decades ago? What agro-ecological conditions enabled India's richly evolved heritage of food and bio-cultural diversity to flourish?

Much of our land in this Indian sub-continent was blessed by Nature with fertile soils teeming with life, abundant sunshine and water, thick forests, and wondrous biodiversity. India, at its roots, is an *aranya* (forest) civilization. Agriculture is barely 10,000 years old. It too was nourished by our rich forests that replenished farm fertility, recharged groundwater, and fed streams, rivers, lakes. Our enormous crop diversity originated in the diversity of uncultivated wilderness, before evolving over many generations of selection and farm-tending in diverse agro-ecological conditions.

With Bhaskar Save at Kalpavruksha

Forests provide vital ecosystem services, efficiently harvesting and storing the sun's energy, sequestering carbon, producing biomass, creating fertile topsoil and guarding against its erosion. They moderate the climate, mitigate global warming, provide oxygen, bring rain, recharge groundwater, replenish and cleanse our rivers and water bodies, buffer against floods, and

provide habitats for rich biodiversity. They also provide the forest dwelling people a huge variety of useful produce – all free gifts of Mother Nature.

With steadily depleting reserves of fossil fuels, as we transition from an age of fossil wealth to an age of biological wealth, we need to remember that it was biological wealth in the first place that created fossil fuel wealth. Photosynthesis is by far the most efficient way of harvesting renewable/solar energy for decentralized, equitable use with multiple benefits, including soil regeneration, carbon sequestration, groundwater recharge, and provision of diverse valuable products.

Leading in efficient harvesting/storage of solar energy are our dense natural forests. Bio-diverse 'food forests' and horticultural gardens of perennials grown by humans come second, followed by organically cultivated poly-cultures of annual / seasonal field crops with minimal/zero external inputs, and full recycling of all non-edible biomass. Amelioration of, and adaptation to, climate change are also best achieved by following this low-cost decentralized path, which sequesters far more carbon for every rupee/dollar spent, compared to high-tech 'solutions'.

"The earth's soil is the mother of all life forms, including *vanaspati srushti*, *jeev srushti* and *prani srushti*," reminds Bhaskarbhai. "In the entire vast cosmos that one gazes upon at night, it is only on earth that such a mind-boggling diversity of life can be found."

Save removing coconut saplings

A hefty volume, 'The Useful Plants of India' (Publications and Information Directorate) provides capsulated information on 5,000 traditionally useful plant species, distilled from the older and far more detailed 12 volume encyclopaedic compilation, 'The Wealth of India'. But

tragically, this real wealth, contained in our fabulously rich biodiversity – evolved over millions of years – is now sorely neglected and indeed, destroyed.

The Principles of Farming in Harmony with Nature

"The fundamental principles of natural farming are quite simple," declares Bhaskar Save. "The first is, 'all living creatures have an equal right to live'. To respect such right, farming must be non-violent.

"The second principle recognizes that 'everything in Nature is useful and serves a purpose in the web of life'.

"The third principle: farming is a *dharma*, a sacred path of serving Nature and fellow creatures; it must not degenerate into a pure *dhandha* or money-oriented business." Short-sighted greed to earn more – ignoring Nature's laws – is at the root of the ever-mounting problems we face.

"Fourth is the principle of perennial fertility regeneration. It observes that we humans have a right to only the edible fruits and seeds of the crops we grow. These constitute 5% to 15% of the plants' biomass yield. The balance 85% to 95% of the biomass, the crop residue, must go back to the soil to renew its fertility, either directly as mulch, or as the manure of farm animals. If this is religiously followed, nothing is needed from outside; the fertility of the land will not decline."

Bhaskar Save adds: "Non-violence, the essential mark of cultural and spiritual evolution, is only possible through natural farming."

"Children," reminds Save, "have a birth-right to suckle the sweet, wholesome milk from their mother's bosom! But tragically, our modern, rapacious way of farming, rampant industrialism and consumerist culture draw on Mother Earth's life-blood and flesh. How then can we hope to receive her continuing nourishment?"

-Bharat Mansata (bharatmansata@yahoo.com)

(See also: 'The Vision of Natural Farming' by Bharat Mansata, 277 pages, Earthcare Books, www.earthcarebooks.com; www.bhaskarsave.nftc.in)

Post-Script: Conspicuously missing in the national awards declared on Republic Day is the highest award, Bharat Ratna, usually bestowed posthumously on those who have performed rare, outstanding service to the nation. I can think of none who is more deserving of it than Bhaskar Save. In his Centenary Year, which is also the 75th anniversary of India's independence, it is high time the government honours the farmers who have toiled to feed the nation.